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# Reagan Seems Confused on Vietnam's History

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 18 — President Reagan sidestepped a question today that sought reassurance that the United States would not secretly become more deeply involved in El Salvador's civil war, but in rejecting a reporter's suggested analogy to Vietnam, Mr. Reagan seemed confused about Vietnamese history.

After his last news conference a month ago, the President was criticized for his handling of purely factual matters and it seemed likely this could happen again. At one point in today's news conference, a reporter said that in the 1960's the Central Intelligence Agency had contrived a "secret plan to get us involved in Vietnam in a surreptitious, covert manner," and asked if the Presi-

dent could assure the public that the United States would not be similarly drawn deeper into El Salvador.

Most students of recent Vietnamese history would disagree that such a "secret plan" existed, and Mr. Reagan also expressed disagreement with the premise of the question.

However, the President went on to give his personal recollections of history, which seemed to clash with widely accepted accounts of the past.

## "Two Separate Countries"

Mr. Reagan said that "North and South Vietnam had been, previous to colonization, two separate countries." He said that at the 1954 Geneva conference, provisions had been made that "these two countries could by a vote of all their people decide together whether they wanted to be one country or not." He continued that Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese Communist leader, "refused to participate in such an election."

The President went on to say that American military advisers were then sent to South Vietnam to work in civilian clothing and without weapons, until they were attacked with "pipe bombs." Ultimately, Mr. Reagan said, former President John F. Kennedy authorized the "sending of a division of Marines."

Nearly all of these statements are either wrong or open to challenge.

When not artificially divided by Chinese or French colonialists, Vietnam has often been politically united. One of the most recent unifications of the nation was achieved by the Emperor Gia Long in 1802.

It was the French who administratively divided Vietnam into not two but three units. However, even under the French, the country was reunified under Emperor Bao Dai in 1950, and the United States gave that entity diplomatic recognition in the same year.

The Geneva accords of 1954, which ended French rule in Indochina, provided for a temporary partition of Viet-

nam at about the 17th parallel and called for national elections in 1956. The new Government of South Vietnam did not sign the accords, and neither did the United States, but Washington undertook not to undermine the agreement.

The Saigon Government under the President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to participate in the proposed elections or even to participate in discussions on how such elections could be held. While many Westerners doubted that really free elections could have been conducted in the Communist-ruled North, Ho Chi Minh did not refuse to participate, and he complained when such balloting did not occur.

In the mid-1950s a United States Military Assistance Group, in uniform, trained nine South Vietnamese divisions. As the Communist insurgency in the South grew in intensity, President Kennedy, in late 1961, authorized "combat support" of Vietnamese forces. Armed helicopter units, American fighter pilots flying with Vietnamese co-pilots and an eventual total of 19,000 combat advisers were soon in the country.

However, Mr. Kennedy did not send American ground combat units to Vietnam. President Johnson sent a Marine brigade there in March 1965, followed by the Third Marine Division and the 173d Airborne Brigade in a few weeks.

Mr. Reagan also seemed to misunderstand legislation on Congressional oversight of clandestine intelligence operations. Mr. Reagan said that "there's a law by which things of this kind have to be cleared with Congressional committees before anything is done."

In fact, the Intelligence Oversight Act of 1980 provides that the select intelligence committees of the Senate and the House should be informed of covert intelligence operations, although the President may in some circumstances delay notification until after the operation is over. The committees do not have, and have not sought, authority to veto such actions.